



**Director of
Central
Intelligence**

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The Major Powers and the Southwest Indian Ocean Islands: Prospects for Change

**National Intelligence Estimate
Memorandum to Holders**

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*NIE 30/70-82
April 1985*

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Since the publication of NIE 30/70-82, *The Major Powers and the Southwest Indian Ocean Islands*, the USSR's regional interests in the island nations of Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Comoros have remained relatively constant. Moscow seeks improved naval and air access and facilities, supports leftist policies and leaders, and encourages local opposition to the expansion of Western military activity—most notably the buildup on Diego Garcia. We believe that, in the near term, the Soviets will continue to see the island nations as targets of opportunity, but of low priority to Moscow's overall global interests. As such, the area is likely to remain one of low-level but steady competition for influence between East and West.

Moscow's primary instrument for maintaining and expanding its influence in the region is its willingness to provide military equipment and training to local armed forces and security services. Moscow also seeks political influence by appealing to the radical pretensions of leftist leaders—particularly in Madagascar and Seychelles—and highlighting the evils of "Western imperialism" and "capitalist exploitations." In Madagascar the Soviets have pursued their traditional tactic of supporting a Marxist-Leninist party to increase their influence.

The USSR, however, faces a number of serious liabilities that constrain its ability to gain greater influence. First and foremost, even ideologically sympathetic leaders are disappointed in the amount of economic aid provided by Moscow. Moreover, during the two-year period of this Estimate, Soviet military capability in the region will remain well behind that of the West. These factors—coupled with the considerable logistic difficulties—almost certainly will limit the willingness and ability of Moscow to intervene directly in island conflicts.

Although relations have cooled during the past two years, *Madagascar* is likely to remain a prime target for Soviet activity in the region. Moscow will continue to use security assistance to maintain influence with Antananarivo and limit the impact of Ratsiraka's economically inspired "turn to the West," while continuing to press for naval access to facilities at the port of Antsiranana (Diego Suarez). Likewise in *Seychelles*, Moscow's willingness to play to the security fears of leftist President Rene will continue to give the USSR considerable leverage. Prospects for increased Soviet influence in *Mauritius* and *Comoros* are considerably less, and both countries are likely to continue keeping the

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US relations with the island governments are not likely to change dramatically over the near term. The United States can expect to be engaged constantly in countering and fending off Soviet criticisms of the West's interference in the affairs of the region—particularly with regard to Diego Garcia—and the “unwillingness” of the West to support the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace. While Washington's failure to meet the islands' economic expectations could impose strains on relations, the lack of alternatives for aid from other sources should place limits on expressions of discontent. The United States is unlikely to gain increased air and naval access to the islands, but this will not seriously damage US interests as long as the Soviets—as we believe will be the case—also fail to achieve any exclusive military access over the next two years. Given the US presence on Diego Garcia and limited military access agreements with Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Oman, military access to the islands is not critical to the US strategic position in the region.

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